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ABSTRACT

Since 1965, Washington has recognized that small schools need special financial consideration if their students are to receive educational opportunities comparable to those in larger districts. In 1977, after school districts brought suit against the state for failing fully to fund basic education, the state legislature passed the Basic Education Act, which placed new program and funding requirements on school district operations. In 1989 small school districts continue to receive enhanced funding to maintain parity with other schools. Although more dollars per pupil are spent, problems in providing equal opportunity for rural students persist. A statistical profile shows Washington to contain districts with quite varied needs. The state funds an average of 80% of the districts' costs of maintenance and operations, in accord with provisions of the state funding formula. Since enrollments in many small school districts are low, the formula is adjusted to determine certificated and classified staff units. The additional funding to small districts, however, has allowed some of them to save excess sums. For others, the added funds have not kept pace with the demands of equal educational opportunities. Difficulties include: (1) shortages of administrative and teaching staff; (2) increased graduation requirements; (3) professional isolation of school practitioners; and (4) the emergence of at-risk youth and lack of resources to deal with the problem. Although some remedies to financial problems can be found by generating cooperative efforts with business, such arrangements do not lessen the need to consider small schools in the overall state apportionment formula. (TES)

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# AN OVERVIEW OF THE SMALL SCHOOL DISTRICT/RURAL EDUCATION FACTOR IN WASHINGTON STATE

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Since 1965, the state of Washington has recognized that small school districts and small schools need special consideration in order for students in those settings to receive comparable educational opportunities to their counterparts in larger districts or buildings. Special consideration, of course, has meant increased funding allocations for qualifying districts and buildings, but historically the criteria for qualification has fluctuated.

In the late 1960's and early 1970's, the primary factor involved in determining whether a small school district or small school building qualified for additional funding was being able to meet the "remote and necessary" test. Remote and necessary was defined by a list of criteria involving such items as topography, weather conditions, distance from alternative facilities, and travel time. If a district or school building proved to the state education office that the criteria were met, then it was approved for special weighting under the existing rules and regulations.

In 1977, after school districts successfully brought suit against the state of Washington for failing to fully fund basic education, the Legislature passed the Basic Education Act. This legislation placed programmatical requirements on school district operations and fine tuned the state funding requirements in an effort to meet the court mandate to fully fund basic education. A small school district/remote and necessary plant funding formula was made part of the legislative appropriations act. Basically, non-high school districts with a certain enrollment, high school districts with certain enrollments in the grade level groupings of K-8 and 9-12, and individual school building facilities judged to be remote and necessary by the State Board of Education were given special financial dispensation.

In 1989, small school districts and remote and necessary school buildings in Washington continue to receive enhanced state funding in order to achieve parity with other school districts with larger enrollments. Although these districts and buildings receive greater amounts of dollars per pupil, problems in providing equal educational opportunities to students continue to persist for them as state and federal rules and regulations increase financial accountability requirements and the move toward educational excellence creates higher programmatical accountability.

The Facts

There are 296 school districts in the state of Washington, involving approximately 790,000 students in grades K-12 and 1,720 school building facilities(See Attachment 1, pg.34 & 35). The 296 districts are classified as first-class(enrollment of 2,000 or more students) or second-class(enrollment below 2,000 students).

* 97 first-class districts(29%) enroll almost 85% of the students

* 209 second-class districts(71%) enroll only 15% of the students
* 75% of the students attend school in Western Washington and 52% are enrolled in the four county metropolitan area of King, Pierce, Kitsap and Snohomish representing only 53 of the state's districts.
* 25% of the students attend school in Eastern Washington representing 136 districts.

These data demonstrate simply that Washington is a state with a large number of students in a small number of school districts and a small number of students in a large number of districts. The net result is a state with many small school districts and/or remote and necessary school buildings, primarily in operation everywhere but the Puget Sound Basin.. Attachment 2 lists the school districts with enrollments less than 250 students(N=73) and shows their placement on a map of the state.

The Funding

On the average, approximately 80% of a school districts maintenance and operations are funded by the state, with the remaining revenue coming from federal sources and excess maintenance and operation levies. Levies are extra property tax revenues generated by the popular vote of the constituents which reside within a school district's taxing boundaries. If a levy does not pass in an individual school district, it can mean serious reductions in staffing or programmatical areas.

The state basic education appropriation to each school district is allocated according to the following formula:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Grades K-3: | 49 | Certificated Instructional Staff Per 1000 FTE Enrollment |
| Grades 4-12: | 46 | Certificated Instructional Staff Per 1000 FTE Enrollment |
| Grades K-12: | 4 | Certificated Administrative Staff Per 1000 FTE Enrollment |
| Grades K-12: | 16.67 | Classified Staff Per 1000 FTE Enrollment |

Once the certificated instructional staff, administrative staff and classified staff units are determined, the school district's average salary is determined using a state-derived experience/ credit formula(LEAP documents) and state salary tables. The district's average salary is then multiplied by the allowable staff units. Added to this are employee benefits and non employee related cost factors. This results in the basic education allocation figure to the district.

The total state apportionment to school districts includes funding for transportation, handicapped education, learning assistance programs, gifted education, bilingual education, school food services and designated block grant funding, but of greatest importance to this report is the basic education allocation as identified above.

Since many of the school districts in Washington do not have 1000 FTE students, the formula for apportionment is adjusted on a fractional basis to determine certificated and classified staff units. The smaller the district, however, the less reasonable it is to use fractional applications against the base formula. As a result, the state has developed the following small school district/remote and necessary school building funding formula:

A) For small districts and remote and necessary plants with fewer than 25 FTE enrollment, a minimum number of certificated units are provided.

| Grade Level | Enrollment Levels | Instructional Units Granted | Administrative Units Granted |
|---|---|---|---|
| K-6 | 0 - 5 | 1.76 | .24 |
| K-8 | 0 - 5 | 1.68 | .32 |
| K-6 | 6 - 25 | 1.76 + (FTE-5)/20 | .24 |
| K-8 | 6 - 25 | 1.68 + (FTE-5)/10 | .32 |

B) For small districts and remote and necessary plants with 25 or more FTE enrollment but not more than 100 FTE in grades K-8, a minimum number of certificated units are provided.

| Grade Level | Enrollment Level Up To | Instructional Units Granted | Administrative Units Granted |
|---|---|---|---|
| K-6 | 60 | 2.76 | .24 |
| 7-8 | 20 | 0.92 | .08 |

For K-6 programs with an FTE enrollment greater than 60 and 7-8 programs with an FTE enrollment greater than 20, staff units will be calculated based on the regular basic education formula.

C) For certain nonhighs, additional instructional staff units are provided.

| Grade Level | Enrollment Between | Additional Instructional Units Granted |
|---|---|---|
| K-6, 1-6 | 50 - 180 | .5 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| K-8 | 70 - 180 | .5 |

D) For districts operating not more than 2 high schools with no more than 300 FTE students(grades 9-12) in each school, a minimum number of certificated units are provided.

| Grade Level | Enrollment Level | Instructional Units Granted | Administrative Units Granted |
|---|---|---|---|
| 9-12 | Up to 60 | 9 | .5 |
| 9-12 | 60 - 300 | 9+(FTE-60/43.5) x .8732 | .5+(FTE-60/43.5) x .1268 |

The Future

The additional funding by weighted formula that is provided to small school districts/remote and necessary school plants is intended to alleviate operational concerns. In fact, for certain qualifying districts and plants, this enhanced funding has allowed some of them to save excess sums of money for investment purposes or for special needs. The state has recently examined these excesses and has recommended formula changes to reduce the funding allocations for districts and/or remote and necessary plants with enrollments of 25 or fewer students.

For the rest of the small school districts/remote and necessary plants in the state, the additional funding has not kept pace with the demands placed upon them to provide equal educational opportunities and services. This is not a problem peculiar to small districts and plants in today's society, but it seems to impact them with greater severity.

One critical difficulty that occurs as the demands upon the districts/buildings increase is the shortage of administrative staff to cope with the onslaught of record-keeping and paperwork. Currently, the 1989 Washington Legislature is considering a bill which has amended to it a request to guarantee at least one administrator per district regardless of size. If this passes, the formula for allocation of staff units will change as will the need for increased revenue resources from the tax payers to accomodate the change.

Other issues impact the small school district/remote and necessary plants from the funding perspective and involve such areas as consolidation with larger surrounding districts;

increased regulations pertaining to certification and endorsements; unavailability of teachers; increased graduation requirements; professional isolation of school practitioners and lack of time/resources for professional development, curriculum development, and school renewal activities; and, the emergence of at-risk youth and the limitation of resources to deal with the problems.

Solutions for the small school districts/remote and necessary plants appear to be limited. Certainly some remedies to the financial concerns can be found in generating more cooperative approaches to doing business; partnerships which increase efficiency but cut costs. These collaborative ventures are occurring in Washington between school districts, between school districts and businesses/individuals in the community, and between school districts and state/federal agencies. All of these arrangements improve the funding picture, but do not lessen the continued need for special small school district/remote and necessary plant consideration in the overall state apportionment formula.

In Washington State, the small school district and the remote and necessary school plant will remain an intregral aspect of the state's mandate to fully fund basic education for all students. The formula for funding will continue, but many districts/buildings will need to locally focus on the future directions of education and make determinations of areas to emphasize/deemphasize in order to provide the best for less. In this way, the small school districts/school plants can survive as viable institutions and their educational programs can remain a locally determined and developed heritage.